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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

"EMPTY" FROM "FREE"

In an article entitled "Zur Etymologie einiger Worter für 'leer'" (*IF.* XXXV, 265 ff.), the Dutch scholar Van Wijk has brought together a number of words in which the meaning "empty" is derived from that of "loose, free," e.g., Dutch *een looze noot* "an empty (hollow) nut." He compares the occasional German use of *frei* in the sense of unoccupied as in *ein freies Zimmer*. So in English we may say "I have this hour free." And the naïve association between "loose" and "free"="unoccupied" is illustrated in a remark recently heard from a colored laundress, that she had "only Wednesdays loose." Two striking examples, not mentioned by Van Wijk, are furnished by the regular words for "empty" in Modern Greek and in English.

Ancient Greek ἄδεια, etymologically "freedom from fear" (δέος), was a technical term for "amnesty, immunity, license." From this was formed an adjective ἄδειος, not attested in classical Greek, which must have been applied first to persons who enjoyed freedom from punishment, freedom from duties, leisure, and so were unoccupied, whence it was extended to objects which were unoccupied, empty. So Modern Greek ἄδειος, "empty" (houses, dishes, etc.), and ἀδειάζω, "to empty," which may, like the English verb, take as the direct object that which is made empty or that which is removed, e.g., ἄδειασε τὰ μπουτίλια, "emptied the bottles," or ἄδειασε τὸ κρασὶ ἀπὸ τὰ μπουτίλια, "emptied the wine from the bottles."

English *empty*, OE. *āemtig*, *āemetig*, "free, idle, void, empty," is derived from OE. *āemta*, *āemetta*, "leisure" (*NED.*, *Century*, *Skeat*, etc.), and must have undergone a semantic development similar to that of Modern Greek ἄδειος from ἄδεια.

A further analogy with the Greek, though it has no bearing on the historical transition in meaning, is the fact that OE. *āemetta* is probably, like ἄδεια, a negative compound. Skeat (*Concise Etym. Dict.*) says: "Perhaps *āemetta* is for **āemōtjon*, from *āe*, prefix, privative, and *mōt*, a meeting for business." So far as the second element is concerned this derivation is not so plausible as the *ad hoc* addition of "for business" to the definition of *mōt* may make it appear. More likely *āemetta* contains a form of the root of *metan* "measure, mete out," and meant originally "lack of assignment, freedom from duty," hence "leisure."

CARL D. BUCK